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SUBJECT: MEETING WITH JOURNALIST SALAHUDDIN SHOAIB CHOWDHURY

¶1. On March 16, poloff met with journalist Salahuddin Shoaib Chowdhury at his request to discuss his 2003 arrest for attempted travel to Israel and his still-pending sedition charges. As a condition of his bail, Chowdhury's passport has been confiscated by the home ministry.

¶2. Chowdhury stated that State Minister for Home Affairs Lutfuzzaman Babar recently told him that he will get his passport back if he first provides a copy of his remarks for the award dinner he hopes to attend in New York to ensure that there would be no embarrassment to the BDG. Chowdhury said he has refused to submit his remarks for censorship, but still believes that his passport may be returned at a scheduled March 21 court hearing. He requested USG support for his case.

¶3. Chowdhury then commented on recent political developments and the rise of Islamic extremism in Bangladesh. He showed poloff a printout of a Microsoft Word document that he had created. In a regular typeface, he had written "JMB," "SHAIKH ABDUR RAHMAN" (leader of the JMB), "BANGLA BHAI" (alias of the JMJB leader), and "SHEIKH HASINA" (leader of the opposition). He then showed what each of these names looked like when he changed the font to Wingdings or Webdings. JMB becomes a smiley face, a bomb with a lit fuse, and a hand making the "OK" symbol. This indicates, he said, that JMB is happy and thought everything was fine when bombs went off around the country last year. In his interpretation of the symbols for Bangla Bhai, he highlighted a columned building that he claimed was clearly the U.S. Supreme Court and surrounded by an eye and a magnifying glass, indicating the attention the USG is paying to his case. He pointed to what looked like a crane, and said that it was a gallows, foretelling Bangla Bhai's eventual fate, and the beach scene at the end that foretold the peaceful future in store for Bangladesh after the hanging. Chowdhury did not give his interpretations for the other names.

¶4. Chowdhury talked about the upcoming elections. If an election is held in 2007, he stated, the BNP/Islamist coalition will win because of their financial resources derived from Islami Bank's laundering of "Afro-Arabian donations." Sheikh Hasina, he claimed, is aware that her Awami League cannot win the election, so she is using the issue of election reform as a pretext for a boycott. It makes little difference to him, he said, which party wins since their policies are so similar and so ineffective. What Bangladesh needs is to put aside the trappings of democracy and to allow a beneficent dictator take control. Only a dictator, who does not need to worry about the JI and IOJ votebanks can rid the country of Islamic extremism, he said.

¶5. Chowdhury stated that the arrest of Bangla Bhai was a staged performance since his face was too well-known for him

to have hidden in the country for months without being recognized. He believes Bangla Bhai was given safe haven by the State Minister for Public Works, but he had no evidence to support that statement, other than the fact that they are from the same home district.

¶6. (SBU) Note: State Home Minister Babar confirmed to us that he has spoken with Chowdhury and that Chowdhury is likely to regain his passport.

CHAMMAS